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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: FRENCH RESIGNED TO DELAYED
ELECTIONS

REF: ABIDJAN 803

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA Cote d'Ivoire desk officer Marie Audouard on November 14 said that France was resigned to the fact that elections in Cote d'Ivoire would not be possible by the November 30 target date, but hoped that they would take place before the beginning of the 2009 rainy season. She said France remained engaged and would continue to support the elections process, including with respect to Operation Licorne and UNOCI, but that France's patience was wearing thin and that further delays that pushed the elections beyond late spring 2009 would test the limits of French tolerance. She acknowledged, however, that there were few alternatives to letting the process play out, however long that might take. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Marie Audouard, MFA desk officer for Cote d'Ivoire, on November 14 provided an update on French thinking in view of the delay in holding the elections in Cote d'Ivoire originally scheduled for November 30. She said that French doubts about the elections timetable had been accelerating since the beginning of September, when it became apparent that the identification and voter registration processes could not possibly be concluded in time. The logistical demands were too great and even under the best of circumstances would have been a challenge. She said that logistical problems, while long apparent, had for many months been underestimated, which allowed for the belief that November 30 was not an unreasonable target. Audouard believed that under 10 percent of the population had been identified and registered by mid-November.

¶3. (C) Audouard said that it was difficult, as noted reftel, to assign blame for the failure to meet the November 30 deadline. It was a combination of many factors. She noted the failure to open all of the identification facilities originally planned. She hoped that within the coming weeks, the various offices could start operating simultaneously rather than in sequence, even though putting a large number of them into operation at the same time would be a daunting task.

¶4. (C) Audouard stressed the importance of maintaining pressure on all parties to continue the preparations for elections at a rapid pace. She feared that lassitude might set in, now that everyone knew that the November 30 deadline could not be met. She said it was probably not a good idea now to set a new, specific target date. She hoped that identification could be completed by the beginning of 2009. Assuming that elections could follow three months after completion of identification, the elections could be held in March (or more likely) April 2009. A date could be set once

identification was completed or nearly completed.

¶5. (C) Audouard said that France very much wanted the elections to take place before the 2009 rainy season began in mid/late-spring in Cote d'Ivoire. Once the rainy season began, there would be a much reduced level of activity, meaning that if the elections did not take place before the rainy season, they could take place only in September or October at the earliest, i.e., almost one year from now. No one wanted a delay of this sort.

¶6. (C) The parties seemed to accept the need for postponing the elections, which Audouard said was a relief. She noted that at one point Gbagbo wanted to push ahead with elections on November 30 or shortly thereafter, which would have allowed him to manipulate the process, but he had apparently backed down and now accepted elections in the first part of ¶2009.

¶7. (C) Audouard confided that the costs to France of its engagement in Cote d'Ivoire were becoming increasingly difficult to bear. The past three years had been spent in preparing for elections that never seemed to happen. Meanwhile, the cost of Operation Licorne and other French "nation-building" efforts kept mounting, with a firm date for drawing down or departing never materializing. A certain fatigue, both financial and psychological, was setting in for France, she said, and France did not seem to be the only outside party experiencing this fatigue.

¶8. (C) Nonetheless, France remained engaged and committed

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to doing its part to bring stability and democracy to Cote d'Ivoire. Operation Licorne (now with about 1,800 forces deployed) was closely linked to UNOCI, and France would never take unilateral action that might compromise the UN's presence. However, Audouard repeated that another round of postponements in the elections process could only exacerbate France's impatience and frustrations. Still, there were few alternatives, and she said that France would continue to ride this out, so long as a reasonably certain end phase, within a reasonably certain timeframe, seemed achievable.

Allegrone